

# Gladiators Star in "Red October"

By Capt. John Carson

Photos © Erik Hildebrandt



**T**he *Gladiators* of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 106, NAS Oceana, Va., personified their name last year when they faced a former nemesis. In October, 23 officers and 55 enlisted personnel accompanied eight F/A-18 *Hornets* to begin a two-week detachment to Laage, Germany. The primary purpose of the trip was to obtain air-to-air combat training for the fleet readiness squadron's replacement pilots (RP) and instructor pilots against dissimilar, former Soviet-bloc aircraft. Aircraft and personnel

from Fighter Squadron Composite 12 also made the transatlantic voyage with the *Gladiators* and participated in the training.

Laage lies in the former East Germany and is home to the JG-73rd Luftwaffe Squadron. During the Cold War, Soviet-built aircraft could have launched from Laage on strikes into western Europe. Now that Germany is reunified, the pilots and aircraft based at Laage train with U.S. forces much like any other NATO ally, with one important difference—they still



The smoking tail section of a MiG in the ground outside the German squadrons' hangar symbolizes the end of the adversarial relationship between American and German fighters. Today, combined training exercises are common, giving U.S. pilots experience against the infamous MiG-29 *Fulcrum*.



fly the MiG-29 *Fulcrum* fighter jet. Although for many years the aircraft has been the yardstick against which U.S. pilots measured themselves, many American pilots have never seen a MiG-29, much less fought against one. When the opportunity arose for VFA-106 pilots to test their mettle against the infamous foe, they jumped at the chance. Today, many potential enemies of the United States still fly the MiG-29, making training against the aircraft critical.

Two Air Force KC-10 *Extender* tankers carried *Gladiator* ground personnel and refueled the F/A-18s on the nonstop 9.5-hour overseas flight. After the final refueling of the *Hornets*, the tankers remained in Mildenhall, England, due to the unavailability of logistical equipment for the KC-10s in Germany. Passengers and cargo flew on to Germany in smaller C-130 *Hercules* and C-9 *Skytrain II* aircraft.

When the training began in Germany, the American pilots were anxious to test themselves against the MiG-29s and their German pilots. The RPs completed the same air-to-air training syllabus that they would normally execute in the U.S., but instead of an American-built adversary aircraft, such as the F-5 *Tiger II* or F-16 *Fighting Falcon*, they got to fight the “real McCoy.” The *Gladiators* also had the opportunity to train with

the German version of the F-4 *Phantom II* and the European-built *Tornado*.

Lieutenant Frank Krevetski, who was in charge of the day-to-day activities of the detachment, had put the RPs through an extensive academic syllabus in preparation for their training in Germany. A building-block approach was used during the detachment, beginning with basic fighter maneuvering (BFM) to teach the RPs to fight MiGs in one-on-one dogfights. Lieutenant (jg) David Rash was especially impressed with the performance of the *Fulcrum*: “I had a MiG right where I wanted him in a really slow airspeed fight when I saw him light his afterburners and accelerate straight up away from me—amazing!”

After the BFM training, the complexity of the hops gradually increased from one versus one to four versus many aircraft in full-blown aerial battles. The *Gladiator* instructor pilots were also getting invaluable training by leading the RPs during the multiplane sorties. They even managed to get an occasional one-versus-one BFM sortie against a MiG-29 for themselves when there was room in the flight schedule. Although the eastern European weather was challenging, causing training to be canceled on some days, the *Gladiators* held their own against the MiGs, validating their prior hard work and





Above, unlike in the old days, a single *Hornet* outnumbered by three MiG-29s is not cause for concern during modern-day training sorties with American and German squadrons. Opposite, Air Force KC-10s refuel the thirsty *Hornets* on their transatlantic flight.

training. “A fantastic experience for all involved, especially for the RPs,” Lt. Krevetski commented.

The Sailor and Marine maintainers of VFA-106 also scored high in their efforts. A total of 220 sorties were flown with minimal delays due to mechanical problems. Not a single aircraft was unflyable for more than a day during the entire period, and the reliability of the aircraft on the nonstop transatlantic legs was impressive as well.

The Germans were gracious hosts and ensured that the *Gladiators* took time out to enjoy the charms of Germany. All agreed that the food was excellent on base and in town. The legendary German beer did not disappoint, either. Midway through the detachment, a competition was organized for personnel from the German and U.S. squadrons present. Ten teams competed at a local go-cart track for the honor of being the fastest team overall. VFA-106 landing signal officers LCDrs. Smeeton, Murphy and Czerewko won the trophy.

A film crew from the Discovery Channel television network accompanied the *Gladiators* during every phase of the detachment. The crew filmed footage for a one-hour documentary to be aired in 2001 on the “Wings” TV series. Entitled “Red October,” the show will document the aerial battles against the MiGs, while highlighting the human side of the exercise.

During the detachment, the *Gladiators* accomplished what they set out to do—obtain realistic training for Navy and Marine Corps replacement pilots to prepare them for service in fleet squadrons. VFA-106 skipper Commander Greg Nosal summed up, “This detachment took a lot of hard work from a great number of people, including personnel from the Navy, Air Force and the German air force. I couldn’t be happier with the results.” ✈

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